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Private schooling as a way of life

Anthony Ashbolt

University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

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PRIVATE SCHOOLING



A S A W A Y O F L I F E

BY ANTHONY ASHBOLT

WARNINGS BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES IN THE hands of a mass media trained in the art of disguising publicity as news. For many years, news about public or private schools or both, has often signalled doom, on the one hand, and infinite variety and riches, on the other. The story is familiar, so familiar as to be tiresome. Lazy journalists, ever at the ready for a slightly new angle, beef up the latest statistics and, *quelle surprise*, another front page news item emerges. Thus the *Sydney Morning Herald* educational writers tell us once again of the drift towards private schools.

Increasingly their angle is that many Labor electorates are being affected, with up to 40 per cent of school students in certain Labor seats attending private schools. But we already knew as much. These writings, then, function as rather gratuitous advice to a Labor Party already scared by the private school lobby and, perhaps, as a signal to those parents who have not yet joined the bandwagon. Yes, there are obligatory references to disquiet with the current government's policy and an acknowledgement that Catholic schools are the main beneficiaries of the increase in numbers, as well as quotes such as this from Jenny Macklin, Labor's shadow minister for education: "Very wealthy schools are getting very significant increases and we don't think they are needy schools. But there are non-government schools that are needy and they should get Federal government support."

It is good to be reminded of Labor's commitment to social justice. It is sad to be reminded of its half-heartedness, its use of guage ("non-government") designed to appease a private school lobby aware that its privileges are potentially threatened by excessively blatant Coalition commitment to the wealthy schools. Cultural hegemony is more easily contested when ideological pretences break down. However, it is given substance by all those who affirm the *neediness* of certain "non-government" schools. Not only are they needy but their existence must testify to their need in the community. Multiple "neediness" thus bolsters private schooling as a way of life.

Labor's 2004 election promise to shift money from the wealthiest private schools was compromised by two policy failures: refusal to deny funding to any and every new private school and insistence that the shift in money go to the "needy" private schools. Yet even that moderate commitment, shown by some polls to have majority support, was slaughtered by media commentators who ignored the polls and followed their own privatised instincts.

An education feature in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a number of years ago had a photo displaying four helmeted, muddied smiling schoolchildren. The headline, "Outdoor Learning", provided a tantalising glimpse of an educational experiment that would "change boys into men". A sub-heading informed us the article will be about the growth of rural campuses. Was

innovation sponsored by the New South Wales Department of Education, a decentralisation initiative for public school students? Of course not. This was yet a further chapter in the world's lengthy paean to private schooling. Barely a week goes without the *Herald*, in one way or another, offering large paid advertisements (infomercials or advertorials) for either a public private school or the private school system as a whole. Their tone is invariably obsequious:

Blake Jennings has a national park in his backyard, a lake at the front door and dozens of hectares of bushland for a playground. Unlike most students who spend their days trapped in the traditional four-wall classroom, the Year 9 student at Scots College goes to school in an alternative and unpredictable classroom—the great outdoors.

As public funding of private schools like Scots increases rapidly, a report should generate widespread outrage. Instead, it is met by acclamation or resignation. But if schools such as Scots have sufficient funds to establish special rural campuses for some of their privileged students, what on earth are they getting state aid for? Fees at Scots are quoted as averaging \$10,000 dollars a year. Yet this school receives money paid for by the general taxpayer. That such an instance of the perversion of public policy should be allowed to go essentially uncontested is deeply disturbing. Not only groups like the Teachers Federation, Parents and Citizens, and the Australian Education Union have not been addressing the issue. They have—but their voices are either drowned out or put through an ideological filter that removes alternatives.

Yet the great majority of our students still attend public schools, declining but still present and accounted for. Given the direction of public policy today, and given the type of school reporting in much of our media, you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. And there is no question that the Howard government has been deliberately shifting funds from the public to the private school system. Every budget since 1998 has highlighted this, as did the now modified Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) scheme, under which there was a significant shift of funds away from public schooling for every student who transferred to a private school.

Look back at the 2002 federal budget, pilloried at the time for its treatment of the disabled and those on permanent medication. Such criticism was justified but in Costello's budget speech and subsequent commentary education was barely mentioned. Thankfully (albeit paradoxically) the *Sydney Morning Herald* came to the rescue—first with an article by Gerard Noonan the day after budget delivery and a day later with an article by Rodney Lesworth, then president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations. Noonan and Molesworth pointed out that there had been a massive shift in funding towards private schools. Canberra's socio-economic status (SES) method of funding had helped produce a budget blow out of \$3.71 billion dollars in 2002 (up from a projected \$3.605 billion).

According to Noonan, the 2002 budget blow-out was "largely due to the growing number of pupils in private schools and the effect of a revised formula to calculate payments". Noonan dismissed the supposed drift to private schools. However, the second point—the SES funding policy—was critical to rising federal

spending on private education. The drift to private schools is not nearly as rapid as the private school cheer squad would have us believe. And SES has been a very handy ideological tool of government, suggesting a keen community interest in redistribution that does not exist. Under SES, status is established according to the postcode of parents' residences. Wealthy pastoralists live alongside migrant agricultural workers and fringe-dwelling Aborigines. Yet SES establishes their equality. Thus it is that wealth is once again redistributed to the rich who can hide their income.

The increased federal funding of private schools (which soon will be over \$5 billion) should be an absolute scandal but education these days is not a hot issue. This is itself a scandal, one assisted by the sort of media bias shown during the recent election. Thus it was that when in the 2003 budget private school funding by the federal government outstripped public university funding, barely a murmur of protest was heard. Criminal neglect of our public education system becomes almost invisible—it isn't happening.

Academics should be out on the streets protesting on behalf of public education. Too many of them, however, take advantage of a private education for their children. Yet in what sense is it private when massively subsidised by government? It is private mostly in an ideological sense: it gives members of the professional middle class a feeling that they are doing the right thing by their children, disguising old class snobbery as "aspirational" politics. There is, of course, the ongoing spate of letters to the editor trotting out the tired old mythology about how much money the taxpayer is saved through the very existence of private schools. The majority of those schools are, however, Catholic schools whose funding is almost solely a combination of state and federal grants. So there are no savings there. Moreover, how do you calculate economically such savings when various public services and infrastructure (including subsidised transport) underpin all schools? If the user pays ideology were applied strictly to private schools there would be very few left.

However, the issue should not be reduced to one of economics alone. The central issue is the social cost of increasing funding to private schools. The drain on comprehensive schools brings with it a drain on the sense of neighbourhood, of equality, of citizenship and consequently of the very sense of what it means to live in a democratic society. Selective state schools do not help in this regard either. However, while their function is openly meritocratic, they are at least part of the state system.

Private schools get to pick and choose in a different way and not just, of course, according to religious belief: around 25 per cent of pupils attending Catholic schools are not even Catholic. In a very real sense the Catholic schools system is neither Catholic nor private, so its *raison d'être* is somewhat puzzling. Perhaps it should simply be incorporated into the state system, a move that would hardly delight those parents who make their "choice" on the ground of snobbery.

Education and the class struggle

Pretending to do otherwise, the SES policy fuels a politics of elitism—under it schools in the top categories benefit most. Thus Trinity Grammar was estimated to receive funding of over \$5 million in 2004, up from close to \$1.5 million in 2000. Likewise, Wesley College received close to \$8 million in 2004, up from

nearly \$3 million in 2000. The fees for both Trinity and Wesley are over \$10,000 a year.

The class politics of all this could not be more stark. Yet of the parliamentary parties only the Greens speak a class language from time to time. In abandoning a language that confronts social inequality Labour has dug itself into a hole. It hands the class struggle to the Coalition who wage it in terms designed to bamboozle, as grants to the privileged are spoken of in terms of "equity"

Howard has always fancied himself as a spokesman for "the battler" but with regard to education (and most other major public policy measures) he and his government stand up for the students at Scots College and against the students at Blacktown High, for the corporate bosses and against the trade unionists, for the wealthy pastoralists and against the Indigenous people, for the private and the privatised and against the public and collective. A proud defender of "the family", Howard's bleatings are mostly insincere, as he has very specific families in mind—those that fit into an increas-

The pressure is on

The pressure is on families to succeed but to do so in ways undermine the wider social fabric. Even people of mostly good democratic intentions can be heard saying: "We must do the thing for our children", which quite often means providing it with a private school education. That, however, is not the thing for a child who is a member of a democratic community. best thing for such a child is a free comprehensive secular schooling. But you would never think so, given the fatuous bleating praise heaped on private schools by the *Herald's* education writers.

Very often that praise is disguised as something else. In a five page *Herald* article ostensibly dealing with the high cost of education, we have a case of special pleading for private schools. It does not appear that way because the ideological covers have been laid. A survey from a group called "a non-profit cooperative parents" with the title "The Australian Scholarship Group" is cited. (Note the use of the terms "non-profit" "cooperative" and this in relation to a group specifically geared towards private schools.) The survey reveals that the cost of providing a private education for children has risen in relation to that of public education. The solution? To make government school fees compulsory and to raise the fee level but in a means-tested fashion. Such a plan would, so the group claims, elevate the status of government schools and make them able to compete more with private schools!

While the contention is laughable there is much on the current public policy agenda that is equally ludicrous. And is this really front-page news? Perhaps for the *Sydney Private School Digest* it is but that, effectively, is what the *Herald* functions as from time to time. The *Herald's* nationalist could retort, undoubtedly, that she quotes from organisations critical of the proposal. True, sure, there is some negative commentary but

it is only in the last column and the overriding framework of authority is given to the Australian Scholarship Group.

And so, under the guise of pluralism the elite reproduce itself. Thus a back-to-school article generously highlights the achievement of one family whose boys all went to the local comprehensive school. But this is sandwiched in between stories of families who decided upon a private education for their children. Moreover, at HSC results time the achievements of private schools are trumpeted loudly, even if sometimes in a rather telling manner. So we have a report on a student from the exclusive Wenona School in North Sydney, who gained a perfect university entrance score. It just so happens that that this student is the daughter of a leading leftist scholar. Why, it might be asked, someone who probably knows quite a bit about the class structure in Australia helping prop up the private school system? The answer is probably obvious. He was doing the "best thing" for his daughter.

Yet that "best thing" simply diminishes the public sphere and helps dismantle public education. One of the problems of what might loosely be called the left in Australia is that so many, maybe many, are doing the "best thing" by their kids even if



ingly privatised world, send their kids to private schools, own shares in Telstra and can't stand the wharfies (having experienced them on *Sixty Minutes*)—families who are no longer families but units of capital and the ideological sponges of the system.

Over 150 years ago, Marx and Engels had this to say about the bourgeois defence of the family:

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.

Plus ça change! The clap-trap continues and we all get drowned in a discourse intended to deceive, an extravagant post-modern word-play in which reform means destruction, restructuring means shedding jobs, universal choice means options for the few and democracy means almost anything one wants it to but actually means rule by media entrepreneurs, talk-back radio demagogues and sloganeers working on behalf of finance capital.

worst thing for a democratic community. Another prominent intellectual challenged me at a conference years ago. What parents do, he pleaded, when the state government (in this case, Jeff Kennett's) has run down the public system? Here was a perfect example of the left accepting the terms of debate and pretending it has *no other choice*—such is the power of public choice theory that it functions perfectly as its own parody!

Here self-interest masquerades as the public good and the *Herald* acts as cheer squad. Stephanie Rathael, a former squad leader, once wrote about how hard it was to choose the right school. She did quote from Denis Fitzgerald, then of the NSW Teachers' Federation, and Ros Brennan, from the NSW Parents' Citizens' Associations, both highly critical of the notion of choice. Yet the very setting of the article was about choice. Turning towards criticism, Rathael retreated quickly to ideological home turf, with an inset highlighting the "dilemma" of one family. Not surprisingly, this was resolved in a way that would warm the heart of the *Herald* and its readers: "The family is now opting for a larger single-sex non-government school even though philosophically [the mother] supports the state school system."

The mother's argument is very revealing: "Do I use your own children to fulfil your own principles?" Think carefully about that question and ask it in relation to all manner of public policy. The answer, of course, depends upon what these principles are. In that mother's case her principles were sound and democratic, based on a notion of the public good. Her practical answer to the question, however, was propelled by personal prejudice and perceived private gain for children, no one else's).

Throughout Australia many people are burying "principles" of equality and community by providing a private education for their children, a choice that serves to exacerbate class, ethnic and religious divisions. Public multiculturalism can contribute to a healthy democratic community. Multiculturalism siphoned through private agencies like schools turns into its opposite and ethnic separatism becomes just another aspect of a society shaped by self-interest.

Imagine the questioning gaze of readers if on page two of *The Sydney Morning Herald* there was a detailed profile of the newly appointed headmaster of Seven Hills High School. Such an appointment begs to go unnoticed. The same is not true with regard to elite private schools. In an article a few years ago on the new headmaster of Knox Grammar he extolled its virtues: "It has extraordinarily good academic results, magnificent music, drama and sporting programs and a reputation as a very friendly and caring school." Given that Knox draws, in the main, on the North Shore elite, all this is hardly surprising. It may, however, surprise me to realise that this school, equipped with abundant facilities, receives over \$1 million in state aid every year.

While many schools lack basic things like a school hall (for example, my children's former local high school) and even some socialist public schools cannot afford essential equipment, this could be a matter of great public concern. The fact that it is not

owes much to the predilections of education writers like those in the *Herald*. The editor of the *Herald* might protest that the paper carries occasional articles in favour of public education, for instance by regular columnist Adele Horin, but that is not the point. Ideological hegemony requires its critics—that is why it is hegemony and not totalitarian domination. Only when the criticisms begin to outweigh the advertorials, will we be experiencing genuinely "contested hegemony".

Against democracy

Hegemony depends upon the subtle insinuation of certain prejudices into everyday thinking, such that they appear natural and without much trace of class origins. So private schooling becomes not the resort of a privileged few but a veritable way of life. John Ralston Saul a few years ago remarked to a somewhat surprised audience that when seven or eight or nine percent of



school age children attend private schools you have a real problem because the undermining of public education through the shift of resources to private schools means democracy's steady erosion. Saul further noted that when you have a growing number of children attending private schools, these children become, amongst other things, policy makers. When they are also education policy makers you can guess where their priorities lie.

Saul might have added that when you have much of the Labor front bench sending (or having sent) their children to private schools, as in Australia today, this symbolises the triumph of private choices over and against public good. No amount of huffing about the importance of public education can excuse a social democrat from making a personal choice that flies in the face of democratic rhetoric. Education should be one of the key battlegrounds for social justice and the future of a democratic community. Yet territory is being ceded and surrender flags waved, as the Labor Party helps entrench belief systems that sustain and extend private schooling.

Anthony Ashbolt lectures in politics at the University of Wollongong. References in this article can be obtained at aashbolt@uow.edu.au